

The status of Plain Swift *Apus unicolor* in Morocco

Rae Vernon

Des observations hivernales de martinets présumés être des Martinets unicolores *Apus unicolor* sur la côte atlantique du Maroc sont analysées. Il semble qu'il s'agisse en effet très vraisemblablement de cette espèce, bien que ceci reste à confirmer. La nidification est soupçonnée dans les falaises de deux localités situées entre Tamri et Agadir.

Introduction

It is well known that the Plain Swift *Apus unicolor* is endemic to the Canary Islands and Madeira (part of the Atlantic Islands or Macaronesia). In the Canaries it breeds in caves or ravines, and in Madeira within inland gullies, nesting in deep rock clefts and on sea cliffs²¹. Small numbers remain in winter but the majority leave the islands in September/October and return in January/February. The species' winter quarters are unknown.

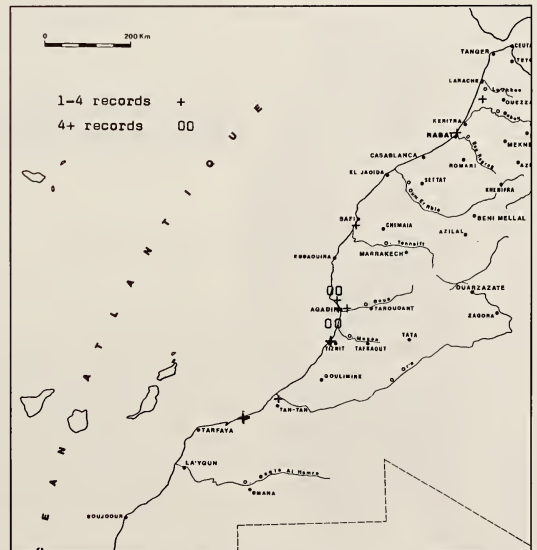
Taxonomy and identification

Plain Swift and Cape Verde (Alexander's) Swift *Apus alexandri* were formerly considered conspecific, and the former has been treated as a race of Common Swift *A. apus*, but both are now generally regarded as being specifically distinct. Early records of Plain Swift on the Cape Verdes were subsequently disregarded by Bourne⁹ and considered to be in error for resident *A. alexandri*. The two are not easy to distinguish. Cape Verde Swift is slightly smaller and shorter winged than Plain Swift; the tail fork being shallower and the overall plumage more grey-brown than black²¹. Plain Swift can occasionally also be confused with Common Swift or Pallid Swift *A. pallidus*²⁵, but is smaller and less dark than Common Swift, with the pale throat patch more obscure, wings less sickle-shaped and a more erratic flight. It is also smaller and blacker than Pallid Swift, with a slimmer body, narrower wings, and shorter and more forked tail¹².

Moroccan records

Since the mid-1960s there have been a number of records (some unpublished) of small dark swifts along the southwest Moroccan coast in winter, mostly between Oued Massa estuary and Tamri. Smith¹⁹ recorded several dark swifts in 1962/63, which he initially identified as Common Swift, but this species rarely, if ever, overwinters in Morocco^{11,24}, and on reflection he wondered whether they might be Plain Swifts originating from the Canary Islands, some 112 km away²⁰. Since the 1960s, additional records have all been of small dark swifts, considered by their observers to be Plain Swift. It is difficult to prove that this species is involved. Other African species of small dark swift

are possible but, in my view, are unlikely. The nearest other small swift species to Morocco is *A. alexandri* in the Cape Verdes, where it is considered resident, though Naurois¹⁶ suggested that some may disperse towards the African coast during exceptionally long periods of drought. In November 1999, I closely observed a small group of suspected Plain Swift along the cliffs north of Agadir and concluded that they appeared identical to Plain Swifts I had observed previously in the Canaries and Madeira. However, proof of this species' occurrence in Morocco will only be forthcoming if birds can be mist-netted and compared with specimens from the Canaries. The numbers of these swifts wintering on the Moroccan coast are quite small, amounting to probably no more than a few hundred individuals, and therefore only representing a small proportion of the total Atlantic Islands population. Thus, the species' main wintering area is still unknown. Some may occur further south on the Moroccan coast or even



Map depicting localities of suspected Plain Swift *Apus unicolor* sightings in Morocco

further south, from where few winter observations are available. In 1988, Dutch observers in the Banc d'Arguin, Mauritania, recorded several small swifts thought to be this species, including four on 25 April, a maximum of 50 on 28 June and four on 21 October¹⁵. Recently a Plain Swift was recorded in the Cape Verdes, in December 2001 (T Clarke pers comm).

Since the late 1980s, there have been records of small dark swifts on the south-west Moroccan coast into April, with indications of possible breeding, as birds have been observed entering holes or crevices in sea cliffs, between Agadir and Tamri. However, proof is required of breeding. If proven, the species will not need to be removed from the list of Macaronesian endemics, as the Morocco coastline from Cap Rhir south is considered part of this region (J Lopez Rondon pers comm)²². The map depicts all sightings of these swifts in Morocco and a summary of the records is presented in the Appendix. Most of these records also appear in Thévenot *et al*²⁴.

Observers visiting Morocco are encouraged to look for these swifts and to send details of any seen to Prof. Jacques Franchimont, Secretary, Morocco Rare Birds Committee, Quartier Abbas Lemsadi, rue n°6, n°22, V.N. 50.000 Meknes, Morocco, e-mail: jfranchimont@extra.net.ma.

Acknowledgements

I thank Valéry Schollaert for initial discussion on Plain Swifts, which prompted me to write this paper, Alec Zino for information on Plain Swifts on Madeira, Eduardo García del Rey and Tony Clarke for comments on the species' status in the Canaries and information relating to Macaronesia. Jacques Franchimont, J. Lopez Rondon and Michel Thévenot also provided information and references concerning the species' status in Macaronesia. Special thanks to all of the observers who have submitted records over the years. I am also grateful to Michel Thévenot for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper. ¶

References

1. Anon. 1985. European news. *Br. Birds* 78: 638–645.
2. Anon. 1987. European news. *Br. Birds* 80: 9–15, 321–330.
3. Anon. 1988. European news. *Br. Birds* 81: 330–340.
4. Anon. 1990. European news. *Br. Birds* 83: 8–17.
5. Anon. 1992. European news. *Br. Birds* 85: 6–16.
6. Anon. 1994. European news. *Br. Birds* 87: 1–15.
7. Bergier, P., Franchimont, J., Thévenot, M. and CHM 2002. Les oiseaux rares au Maroc. Rapport de la Commission d'Homologation Marocaine, numéro 4 (1998). *Porphyrio* 12: 36–45.
8. Bourne, W.R.P. 1955. The birds of the Cape Verde Islands. *Ibis* 97: 508–556.
9. Bourne, W.R.P. 1966. Further notes on the birds of the Cape Verde Islands. *Ibis* 108: 425–429.

10. El Ghazi, A. Franchimont, J. and Moumni, T. 1998/9. Chronique ornithologique du GOMAC pour 1997. *Porphyrio* 10–11: 60–253.
11. Etchécopar, R.D. and Hüe, F. 1967. *The Birds of North Africa*. London, UK & Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd.
12. Fry, C.H., Keith, S. and Urban, E.K. (eds) 1988. *The Birds of Africa*. Vol 3. London, UK: Academic Press.
13. Hazevoet, C.J. 1995. *The Birds of the Cape Verde Islands: an annotated checklist*. BOU Checklist No. 13. Tring: British Ornithologists' Union.
14. Mdarhri Alaoui, E.K., Arhzaif, Z.L. and Thévenot, M. 1990. Chronique ornithologie du GOMAC 1989/90. *Porphyrio* 2: 65–88.
15. Meiningner, P.L., Duiven, P., Marteiijn, E.C.L. and van Spanje, T.N. 1990. Notable bird observations from Mauritania. *Malimbus* 12: 19–24.
16. Naurois, R. de 1986. Le Martinet *Apus alexandri* Hartert 1901 endémique de l'archipel du Cap Vert. *Bol. Mus. Mun. Funchal* 38: 130–140.
17. Pouteau, C. 1993. Chronique ornithologique du GOMAC pour 1992. *Porphyrio* 5: 60–154.
18. Schollaert, V. and Franchimont, J. 1995. Chronique ornithologique du GOMAC pour 1994. *Porphyrio* 7: 99–146.
19. Smith, K.D. 1965. On the birds of Morocco. *Ibis* 107: 493–526.
20. Smith, K.D. 1968. Swifts in Spain and Morocco. *Ibis* 110: 208.
21. Snow, D.W. and Perrins, C.M. (eds) 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic. Concise Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
22. Takhtajan, A. 1986. *The Floristic Regions of the World*. San Diego: University of California Press.
23. Thévenot, M., Bergier, P. and Beaubrun, P. 1980. Compte rendu d'ornithologie Marocaine année 1979. *Doc. de l'Institut Scientifique* 5: 1–67.
24. Thévenot, M., Vernon, R. and Bergier, P. 2002. *The Birds of Morocco: an annotated checklist*. BOU Checklist No. 20. Tring: British Ornithologists' Union.
25. van der Shot, W. and van den Berg, M. 1993. Plain Swifts in Morocco. *Birding World* 6: 335.
26. van den Berg, A. B 1989. Bird records in Morocco. *Dutch Birding* 11: 31–34, 87.

16OrchidMeadow, Pullmeryic, Chepstow, Guent NP166HP, UK.

Appendix. Records of suspected Plain Swifts *Apus unicolor* in Morocco

* Possible breeding localities

** Record subsequently withdrawn, as wings and tail considered too short for Plain Swift

Sidi Akhfennir (Tarfaya)

One, 5 January 1988** (A van den Berg)³²⁶.

Oued Laaguig estuary (Lower Draa)

5–6, 6–7 April 1997 (F Cuzin).

Tan-Tan Plage (Lower Draa)

One, 3 February 1992 (C Murphy); 1–2, 21–22 January 1997 (J Troop)¹⁰.

25 km south of Oued Massa estuary

Two carrying nesting material and entering cliff, 25 April 1996* (C Bowden).

Oued Massa estuary

'Some', 28 December 1977 (B Anderson); 5, January 1978 (U B Casselen); 2–3, 7 April 1978 (S Davies *et al*); 20, 4–10 February, 1979 (P J Ewins)²²; one, 24 August 1979 (P W J Findlay); one, 24 December 1979 (J Franchimont)²³; one, 7 January 1987 (A Gregory)³; one, 31 December 1988 (T Gullick)⁴; two, 27 December 1989 (O Amani)¹⁴; eight, 12 February 1990 (M Ajne *et al*); five, 7 January and 9 January 1992 (M Forsberg, M Golley & J Nilssen); unknown number, 23 January 1992 (D Moreen, P Hiney & A Rhods)¹⁷; one, 11–12 April 1992 (A Eadson)¹⁷; 11, 21 January 1997 (M Leivo & H Kontkanen); and 14–15, 10 April 2001 (V Schollaert).

Agadir (Souss estuary)

Sixty, 27 January 1979 (P J Ewins)²³; four, over unfinished buildings, 27 January 1982 (M J Palmer); eight, 14 March 1983 (N Dymond & D Coutts)¹; and 2–3, 6–7 December 1985 (C Hjort)².

Agadir–Cap Rhir

Ten, 30 March 1993* (C Thomas *et al*)⁶; c6, 3 km north of Taghazout, 29 April 1998* (J D R Vernon)⁷.

Tamri

Recorded, 30 December 1984 (P Geniez); four pairs, 5 April 1988* (E & C Marsh)⁴; 50 pairs, 2 April 1990* (R Jabekk)¹⁴; one, 2 February 1992 (C Murphy); 40, south of Tamri, 23 April 1992* (P Lansdown & B Bland)⁶; c4 pairs, 19 April 1993* (T Gullick & J Coldewey)⁶; 180, 1 km south of Tamri, 14 February 1994 (H Karhu *et al*)¹⁶; six, 19 January 1999 (P Lansdown); and three, 10 km north of Tamri, April 1999 (C Bowden).

Safi

Two, 13 December 1986 (M Grussu); two, 1 January 1989 (T Gullick)⁴.

Sidi Bou Rhaba

Eighty, 30 January 1997 (M Leivo & H Kontkanen)

Moulay Boussehham

Three, 2 December 1990 (N J Redman)⁵.



NEOTROPICAL BIRD CLUB

Join the organisation
for the Neotropical
Birder today!

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

- ◆ a twice-yearly journal, *Cotinga*, devoted to Neotropical birds and their conservation
- ◆ *Cotinga*, also features news and views and reports recent findings from the region
- ◆ it also summarises current taxonomic developments in Neotropical ornithology

MEMBERSHIP RATES

- ◆ £17 (US\$34) per year
- ◆ a Sterling cheque or US\$ payable to 'Neotropical Bird Club'

For more details do write to us at

NBC, c/o The Lodge, Sandy,
Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, UK

NBC, c/o American Birding
Association, PO Box 6599,
Colorado Springs, CO 80934,
USA



Registered Charity no. 1040130

WEB SITE ADDRESS – <http://www.neotropicalbirdclub.org>

Colourful Puffleg *Eriocnemis
mirabilis* Jon Fjeldsa